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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

17 August 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE BOARD

SUBJECT: Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam --
Issues for Discussion

Scope and Purpose

1. Those who oppose the American course in Vietnam have spoken loud and long of the intolerable costs of the war -- material, political, and moral. Naturally, such people tend to be less eloquent concerning the consequences which might follow from acknowledgment of failure at this late stage.

2. For their part, supporters of the effort in Vietnam have spoken most ominously of far-reaching negative effects which would result from the abandonment of our stated objectives there. But they have also been quite vague about defining what the costs would be and exactly where and how the impact would be felt.

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3. What we are attempting in this paper is to provide some greater precision about the costs, for American policy and interests as a whole, of an unfavorable outcome in Vietnam. It is not assumed in this inquiry that such an outcome is now inevitable. If that were the point of departure, the discussion would focus instead on measures which might be taken to minimize untoward effects. The aim is rather to provide some more solid basis for measuring the costs of an unfavorable outcome against the exertions which would presumably still be required to achieve a favorable one.

What is Meant by an "Unfavorable Outcome"?

4. The manner in which the unfavorable outcome was arrived at would evidently have considerable bearing on the kind and degree of effects which might ensue. Some have spoken simply of withdrawal, appearing to mean as rapid as possible an evacuation of US forces pursuant to a unilateral decision. Taking up a defensive military position in a limited area as a prelude to negotiations has been mentioned. It has also been proposed to offer terms of negotiation so promising for the eventual realization of Hanoi's aims -- and so discouraging for Saigon -- as virtually to insure early achievement of an accord.

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5. The discussion in the paper should proceed from what we would take to be a realistic scenario for war termination. This excludes any precipitate disengagement by US forces. It excludes any sudden acceptance of Communist political demands for reconstituting the Saigon regime with the participation of the NLF. It seems realistic to believe that, given the present scale of US involvement and the sacrifices already made, that this government would approach a settlement short of its aims only by a series of steps involving gradual adjustment of our present political-military posture. Apart from the internal political pressures that would cause this to be so, the very concern to minimize unfavorable effects on the American world position and on other relationships would argue strongly for such a course. In a sense, therefore, we shall be discussing the best rather than the worst case, or rather a US effort to achieve the best case, given a decision in present circumstances to place priority on ending hostilities rather than on achievement of the aims we have so far pursued.

6. The process would presumably begin with a US move to accept the terms on which Hanoi has indicated that it would enter negotiations, i.e., cessation of bombing without firm assurance of any equivalent step of de-escalation on the Communist side.

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Assuming that Hanoi would in fact enter negotiations on this basis, it would see them, not as a search for a "compromise" settlement, but as the final phase of its long struggle for Communist power in the South.

7. The negotiations would inevitably be prolonged and the North Vietnamese would hope to continue applying military pressure as these proceeded. Indeed, if they came to believe that the US was determined to get out of the war at almost any price, they might resume full hostilities; some leaders in Hanoi would probably prefer on grounds of ideology and national pride to make the achievement of their aims seem to be the result of their military prowess. Moreover, there might be considerable risk that the Saigon regime would collapse during negotiations, leaving the US military as the only real authority in the areas still free of Communist control.

8. Thus the phase of negotiation itself could prove extremely perilous and bring about termination of the war in a manner more costly to the US than had been foreseen when the move for negotiation was initiated. Presumably the more the final outcome looked like it was forced on the US rather than like a freely negotiated peace, the more damaging the broader repercussions would be.

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9. Even if negotiations produced arrangements which appeared to restore the 1954 settlement and to permit withdrawal of US forces, the indefinite survival of a non-Communist regime in Saigon would not be assured. Unless political development proceeds more rapidly in the South than now seems likely, the society would remain vulnerable to a renewal of the Communist assault by political or violent methods or a combination of both. Thus there would be a good chance that, despite a settlement of the present war, the Communists would achieve their aims after an interval of some years, barring a renewed US military involvement.

10. In the final analysis, therefore, once the US decides that its priority goal is military disengagement, a complete Communist victory, while not a foregone conclusion, is a likely prospect sooner or later. If this result took some years to become fully evident, perhaps the impression that American policy and arms had suffered a major defeat would be blurred somewhat. But the Communists, in Hanoi as elsewhere, would have little interest in allowing this fact to be obscured.

Consequences for American Policy and Interests

11. No single event of this kind can by itself be determining for the subsequent course of developments affecting American policy

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and interests. The US is too great a power with too complex an involvement in world affairs for this to be true. A setback in Vietnam should be thought of as contributing to but not decisive for the subsequent shape of events. It would add to or subtract from other forces and tendencies which would in any case be operating on the world scene and having effect on our affairs.

12. In attempting to net out these complex interactions it is impossible to overlook how American attitudes themselves would be affected. In some probably significant way the American government and people would revise their view of themselves and of the role they were willing and able to play in world affairs. We cannot presume to project this factor into the equation, but it can be thought of as giving the discussion of other effects an even more tentative character.

13. What then would be the effects in the external world, in the attitudes and conduct of other states, and in the movement of political forces in a broad sense? Probably the following should be considered as the main heads of discussion:

(1) It goes without saying that in many quarters there would be a reappraisal of American power and will, and of the wisdom of our policies. In a sense, international politics is the sum of

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calculations made by all the actors concerning the power and intentions of all others. The US has been viewed as the most powerful actor in the game. Is there any way to measure, and to state plausibly, a general effect proceeding from all the re-calculations that would inevitably be made?

(2) In particular, what is to be made of the proposition that many states to which the US has defense commitments would no longer regard these as reliable?

(3) What implications would there be for the future of Southeast Asia? Are Hanoi's aspirations limited to the control of South Vietnam? How would Chinese aims and conduct in the region be affected? What would be the repercussions for the internal stability and the external alignment of non-Communist states in the area?

(4) Would the assumed outcome in Vietnam have a bearing on the struggle of internal forces in China, and therefore on the long-term prospects of Chinese-American relations?

(5) How would the US role in Asia as a whole be affected -- for example, as a result of inferences drawn in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan?

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(6) The argument has been made that Vietnam is a test of the effectiveness of Communist insurgency. Would Communist parties in other areas be led to imitate the Vietnamese, i.e., parties which would not otherwise have resorted to insurgency and civil war? Can areas where this is likely to occur be identified? Would there be a tendency for the Communist movement generally to coalesce in support of greater reliance on armed violence?

(7) What effects can be foreseen on Soviet attitudes, and on the prospects of Soviet-American relations?

(8) What conclusions might be drawn in Western Europe, and how would the Atlantic Alliance be affected?

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